

# RESEARCH STUDY

Thrasyvoulos Terry Stamatopoulos

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## EICTP Expert Paper

**The Role of Turkey in the Eastern  
Mediterranean Conflict Zone: A country  
transformed and a glimpse into the future**

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**THE ROLE OF TURKEY IN THE EASTERN  
MEDITERRANEAN CONFLICT ZONE: A COUNTRY  
TRANSFORMED AND A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE**

*by Thrasyvoulos Terry Stamatopoulos*

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### **Address:**

European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP)  
Esslinggasse 17/5, AT-1010 Vienna  
[www.eictp.eu](http://www.eictp.eu)

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## **THE ROLE OF TURKEY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN CONFLICT ZONE: A COUNTRY TRANSFORMED AND A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE**

In the exercise of Turkish foreign policy in the last 15-20 years, we have witnessed a serious divergence from an essentially Western orientation, an increasing use of coercive diplomacy and even of overt threat and use of force, in an area of operation which is expanding. The question is what has led to the conditions that have allowed it and what is driving this behaviour which has been described as having revisionist and even hegemonic goals in the Eastern Mediterranean, if not beyond?

Demographic changes have played an important role in its genesis. Until the 1950s, the large majority of Turkey's population was rural, agricultural, poorly educated and to a large extent culturally distinct from that of the urban population in western Turkey. Though very traditional, and as such deeply religious and conservative, this rural population was under the direct influence of local leaders who, integrated in the urban and secular Kemalist patronage system, directed their votes accordingly. Cities accounted for only 25% of the total population. Urbanization, however, accelerated, gaining momentum after the 1970s. Today percentages are reversed, with the urban population accounting for 75% of the total. As percentages changed, so did the demographic composition of cities. Istanbul, by far the largest, is indicative of this change. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, its population in 2014 was 14,221,482 of which only 2,162,588 were of local origin, whereas 8,573,820 originated from agricultural Central or Eastern Anatolia and from the Black Sea.

With its move to the cities, this religious conservative element, now disengaged from the previous system of political patronage, became the power base of new political entities, which they considered more representative of their own value system, like the Welfare Party, electing Mr. Erbakan as Prime Minister in 1996. Mr. Erdogan, who had been elected Mayor of Istanbul under the same party two years previously, went on to found the Justice and Development Party (AKP) using the same power base, winning the elections in 2002. He has essentially remained in power ever since, with the AKP transformed into the establishment party and Turkey transformed into a country dominated to a great extent by Islamist politics and values.

The beliefs and personality of Mr. Erdogan, whose own parents had moved to Istanbul from the Black Sea area, are an important part of the equation. His political beliefs were formed under his mentor Necmettin Erbakan who often harped back to the Seljuk Turks, the conquest of Constantinople, the siege of Vienna by the Ottomans, and who got along with Jean-Marie Le Pen because they both believed in nationalism and that Islam and Christianity are incompatible civilizations. Erdogan's spiritual guide, according to his own declaration in 2013, was Necip Fazil Kısakurek who was a strong Islamist and avowed anti-Semite, whom he had met as a student and whose funeral he had attended at the start of his political career. At the beginning of his term as prime minister in 2003 Erdogan came across as a moderate and a reformist. He amended extreme articles of the penal code and engaged in reforms more generally which were regarded favourably in Brussels and Washington. That said, many in Turkey (including Turkish colleagues and friends) were not convinced at the time and warned that he had a hidden Islamist agenda

which would be revealed after he had consolidated his power. Perhaps a glimpse of what was to come had been offered when, a few days before winning the 27 March 1994 Istanbul municipal elections, he had declared: "We who stand before the saddened Hagia Sophia will conquer Istanbul for the second time. March 27 will be the day when one era will close and another era will begin".

Since the coming to power of Mr. Erdogan, a mixture of neo-Ottomanism, religion, nationalism, and internal developments pertaining to the military and the AKP's and his own political (and at times personal) fortunes has been driving what has become a much more assertive and aggressive Turkish foreign policy, attempting to establish Turkey as a strong player in the region and beyond, while orienting the country away from relationships established since the founding of the Republic and especially after World War II.

Neo-Ottomanism, having an internal political dimension through its appeal to the nationalist sentiment of the masses, is also meant to spearhead an effort by Turkey to expand its influence in countries or areas which had been part of the Empire. It has met with some, albeit limited, success where it has employed soft-power tools, in particular in some Balkan countries with Muslim populations such as Bosnia and Albania. Overall, however, reactions outside Turkey have ranged from unfavourable to outright hostile in countries with predominantly Christian populations but even Muslim ones which do not hold with the benevolent image or positive memories of Ottoman rule which Ankara has tried to project. This is no surprise, given the manner of its presentation, including by its main theoretician Ahmet Davutoglu. In April 2012, then still Foreign Minister, he said in a speech: "...whatever we lost between 1911-23, whatever lands we withdrew from, from 2011-23 we shall once again meet our brothers in those lands. This is...a historic mission". Despite this, Turkish authorities apparently see some value in foreign policy messaging to the rest of the world through the use of their Ottoman past. Characteristic of this is the naming of hydrocarbon exploration and drilling vessels they are employing in their aggressive behaviour in the Eastern Mediterranean. Two are named after the brothers Barbarossa and Oruc, corsairs of the 16<sup>th</sup> century who, based in present day Algeria, raided the entire Christian north coast of the Mediterranean. They later became admirals of the Ottoman navy fighting or capturing ships of Spain, France, Genoa, and Britain. A third vessel is named Yavuz, after the sultan Selim I who, also in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, conquered Egypt and much of the Arabian Peninsula (including Mecca and Medina) and is considered for this in Turkey to be the first sultan who was also Caliph.

Religion, whose role in foreign policy had been rather limited under the Kemalists (for instance through use of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation) gained in importance under the AKP. In the beginning its religious dimension actually helped the government gain acceptance in the West through the image of a moderate political Islam that could act as a prototype for democratic transformation in Muslim countries. Developments in the region gradually disabused Western analysts and politicians of such notions. It still remains a factor, however, in

Ankara's calculus. Turkey initially joined Saudi Arabia in support of Sunni opposition to Assad (an Alawite) in Syria, turning a blind eye to or even actively supporting extreme Islamist elements among them. It has since broken with the Saudis (who decided that political Islam is not a good idea) but continues to collaborate closely with Qatar which shares (and finances much of) Ankara's pro-Muslim Brotherhood activism. This view of religion has played a crucial role in a number of Turkish foreign policy decisions. For example, the overthrow of Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood government has been the main reason for the open enmity between Turkey and Egypt. Ankara has been providing military support for several years to the Misrata militia in western Libya and more recently also to the Tripoli government, at least partly because of their pro-Muslim Brotherhood stance. The same applies to a large extent to Turkey's support of Hamas. Mr. Erdogan likes to portray himself as a world leader for Islam. And besides soft and hard-power displays, here as well he employs symbolism. Such an emblematic occasion was the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque in July 2020. This act is quite revealing of a long-term plan if one sees it in the light of Erdogan's statement in March 1994. Moreover, as a message, it had a multitude of recipients. It was directed to Greece and to Christians (especially the Orthodox) worldwide as the Hagia Sophia had been the prime cathedral of Christianity for 916 years until the fall of Constantinople. It was a message of open defiance to the United States and all those of the international community who had tried to dissuade him from changing the status of this UNESCO World Heritage site. It was a message to his religious constituency inside Turkey but also to his ultra-nationalist one; the head of the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate (the Diyanet) delivering the first sermon while holding a sword and saying that this "is a tradition in mosques that are the symbol of conquests" painted quite a telling picture.

Finally, it was also a message to Muslims beyond Turkey as the Turkish Presidency website (the Arabic text) linked the decision to reviving Islam from Bukhara in Uzbekistan to Andalusia in Spain and as part of "the return of freedom to al-Aqsa". This reference, linking the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem to the Hagia Sophia and Spain is seen by academic and writer Seth J. Frantzman and others as coded terminology for a wider religious agenda. There are numerous instances of similar messaging, such as the naming of the Turkish military base in Qatar "Khalid bin Walid" after a general who led the Prophet Mohamed's troops in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and whom Mohamed called the "Unsheathed Sword of Allah".

Neo-Ottomanism and religion under the AKP have combined into a more aggressive nationalism, building on nationalist forces ever present in Turkish society and political life alongside some nostalgia for the Ottoman era. It is of some value in our effort to understand the transition of Turkey to look at how this combination made its way into the military which was considered the mainstay of secularism and Kemalist Western orientation. Truth be told there was always a strong nationalist element -often tied to a "Eurasian" undercurrent- in the military, which was held in check during the Cold War, with Turkey feeling the pressure of the Soviet Union and accepted as a member of NATO. The military at that time was still an entity of its own in Turkey.

It had significant control over promotions, with little dependence on civilian leadership, which made for greater loyalty to the hierarchy than to the civilian authorities. That the Chief of the General Staff preceded the Defence Minister (his civilian boss) in the order of official state protocol was indicative of the status of the military. The Armed Forces were also an economic force to be reckoned with, having established a huge holding company using their pension fund (OYAK). Given the Western orientation and strict secularism of the Armed Forces hierarchy, voicing an opposing view did not auger well for promotion in the ranks. All this changed under the AKP government. Civilian authority was established (to the applause of Western allies) with the military now following the lead of the government. With government policy more assertive and nationalistic (and anything but secular), expressing a similar outlook now advances rather than impedes promotion. As one Turkish analyst put it, "Kemalism has been transformed. In the military Kemalism is in alliance with Islamism. The common denominator is nationalism". Overt strong nationalism seems now to be a permanent feature in the military and as such, not only does the military take the lead from government nationalist policy but has at times been seen to get ahead of it. A case in point is the development of the idea of the Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan) by Rear Admiral Cem Gurdeniz, now retired but remaining a vocal supporter of the Eurasian, anti-Atlantic tendency in the officer corps. The Blue Homeland, which claims large part of the continental shelf and supernatant waters in the East Mediterranean for Turkey, has now been adopted as the doctrine of an aggressive expansionist foreign policy, bringing Turkey into conflict with many countries in the area (extending even further west because of its ambitions in Libya) and close to military confrontation with fellow NATO member Greece.

The gradual distancing of a considerable segment of the military from the West, especially from the United States, coupled with the evolution of a more assertive foreign policy, illuminates US-Turkish relations more broadly, as well as the latter's conduct regarding NATO. Turkey's military approach to the Cyprus issue has in the past twice factored into this process of distancing. In 1964, when Turkey was planning military intervention in Cyprus, US President Lyndon Johnson sent a letter to the Turkish President not only cautioning against such a move but also questioning whether NATO Allies would feel obliged to protect Turkey (under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty which is the backbone of the Alliance) should its unilateral military action provoke Soviet intervention. The arms embargo imposed by the US following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 added to the residual resentment felt by the political class but also by many in the military, albeit still tempered by the broader strategic choices of the country at the time. Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, and with the cork out of the bottle so-to-speak, we see more expressions of such resentment and distancing. The Secretary General of the National Security Council, a four-star general, in a speech in 1999 condemns NATO and advocates an alliance with Russia and Iran. In 2003 a request by the US to use Turkish territory, including for transit, in its attack on Iraq is rejected, a watershed moment in the deterioration of relations between Ankara and Washington (and especially the Pentagon) where it is seen as a significant breach of trust. More recently, the Syrian conflict has also been a source of resentment and further erosion of



trust on both sides (including also in other members of the anti-Daesh/ISIS Coalition) and is likely to continue its contribution in this direction. The US side has questioned Turkish priorities and motivation, with Ankara seen as providing support to extreme fundamentalist elements by allowing their transit to Syria through its territory, by directing arms to such elements that the US had consigned for moderate opposition forces, and by providing medical treatment to wounded jihadists in hospitals on the Turkish side of the border, all of which have been denied by official Turkey. Although NATO Allies provided air defence batteries for protection against the possibility of missiles fired from Syrian territory and stood by Turkey when it downed a Russian fighter which had violated Turkish airspace for all of 17 seconds, they have been sceptical of Turkish unilateral initiatives as well as of its cooperation with Russia in Syria, limited and transactional as it may look. Turkey's motives and practices regarding the establishment of "security zones" in northern Syria have also been questioned; all the more as much of the area is now administered directly by the neighbouring Turkish Governorate of Gaziantep which, inter alia, is creating Turkish-language schools and is engaging in other policies that give the distinct impression of an effort to consolidate a more permanent presence, if not to assimilate the area and much of its population. These questions are compounded by the documented use of Islamist fighters from these (and other) areas of northern Syria -and it seems also from the refugee pool in Turkey- in Ankara's proxy wars in Libya and Azerbaijan. From the Turkish side there is corresponding resentment regarding the arming of Kurdish-Syrian forces, especially of the YPG which has played a crucial role in the fight against Daesh jihadists, but which Ankara regards as a branch of the PKK organization branded as terrorist. In one of the many contradictions in Turkish policy, however, Ankara sees no problem in providing cover and financing to Hamas, which has also been branded as a terrorist organization, a further source of friction with the United States and of course with Israel.

Finally, many in Turkey, including the President, believe that the attempted military coup in 2016 received blessing, if not direction, from the United States. The coup attempt has had a multi-layered impact. It seems to have consolidated the attitude of Mr. Erdogan against the United States, all the more since even the friendly Trump Administration has refused to extradite Fethullah Gülen, head of FETO, seen as the mastermind of the coup by the President, the AKP but also more across Turkey. There is widespread speculation as to who in fact engineered that event. Regardless of its provenance, it has given Mr. Erdogan additional cause to proceed with weeding out elements he has considered sympathetic to FETO (or even merely unsympathetic to his own policies) or putschists, in all areas of public administration, including continuing such exercise concerning thousands of members of the military, with over 300 - including five colonels - detained in December 2020. This is affecting the composition and the orientation of the military, as most of the officers expelled as alleged FETO conspirators tend to be more Western-oriented whereas the ones replacing them tend to be vetted through political filters currently in place. The days when the bureaucracy (including the then "uncleansed" diplomatic service but also the military) pushed for policies falling within the traditional political framework are over. As one Turkish scholar put it, "given the political situation in Turkey there is no 'brave general' who will

argue for good relations with the USA". In fact military-to-military relations with the US are at an all-time low; the legal basis for such relations has not been updated since the Cooperation Agreement of 1980; the mil-to-mil dialogue mechanism has not functioned since the 2016 coup; most importantly there is a huge gap of trust between the US and Turkey both at the military level but also at the cross-party political one. For all the reasons mentioned above (and more that have not) relations between the militaries of Turkey and the US, especially with Central Command/CENTCOM whose area of responsibility comprises the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Gulf, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, are tense to say the least. For the most part these mil-to-mil US-Turkey problems have not spilled over into NATO, with relatively better relations between the Turkish military and US European Command/EUCOM -compared to CENTCOM- being a contributing factor. (The notable exception to this is the S-400 issue which is a political as well as a defence issue and which we will look at below.) However, the bottom line as Soner Cagaptay put it, is that "the US military was Turkey's biggest fan. Now it seems to be Ankara's biggest adversary".

Turkey participates fully in NATO political and military bodies. It continues to provide forces to NATO operations and for defence planning purposes, has a defence budget that complies with the 2% of GDP spending goal, and will be assuming command of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) in 2021. That said, one can see a growing estrangement of Allies with Turkey over the past several years which can be attributed to a number of factors. Most Allies see the changing set of values inside Turkey and an increase in its authoritarian and illiberal style of government as incompatible with the values of NATO enshrined in the preamble of the Washington Treaty. Some analysts argue that common values can be left "outside the bracket". However, the Reflection Group put together by the NATO Secretary General, in its report delivered in late November 2020 which is slated to form a building bloc for the development of a new Strategic Concept, states that "A shared democratic identity is what distinguishes the Alliance from the principal threats and challenges it faces". Turkey is also seen as disregarding its commitments under Article 1 of the Treaty, not least through its threat of force against its ally Greece, in pursuit of its nationalist Blue Homeland goals with little regard to International Law as all other members of the Alliance understand it. This matter was brought for discussion to the North Atlantic Council with no conclusion of course, given the consensus rule. However, one can easily surmise that it has greatly contributed to the recommendation by the Reflection Group report that "Allies should renew their collective commitment under Article 1 of the North Atlantic Treaty to settle disputes by peaceful means". For the past several years Turkey has been pursuing its own national goals within NATO in a manner that singles it out in the eyes of Allies, augments this sense of distancing, and contributes to an erosion of Alliance solidarity. There has been frustration (on both sides of the divide) for instance over what constitutes "terrorism" and, therefore, how it should be treated in Alliance texts and policy. In the context of frustration over such differences, Turkey had gone as far as to block NATO defence plans for the Baltic states. In addition, cooperation between Ankara and Moscow in Syria has contributed to a sense of alienation among Allies, especially those who are most weary of Russian behaviour and policy aims, an important one on which all

agree is to sow division inside NATO. Allies complain that Ankara is impeding the staffing with political officers of the Regional Hub for the South, established under Joint Forces Command Naples, because it would not have full control over intelligence products generated by the Hub to achieve better situational awareness. It is furthermore effectively blocking NATO partners, such as Finland, Austria and Switzerland from contributing personnel in the context of the Framework for the South for similar reasons. Turkey is also blocking cooperation more broadly with NATO partner countries it has bilateral differences with, especially Austria, Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Activities by Turkey concerning Libya, in defiance of NATO operation Sea Guardian, have also recently created tensions with Allies. Acting under orders from NATO Maritime Command (MARCOM), a French frigate, which attempted to interrogate and approach a merchant ship suspected of carrying contraband to the Libyan port of Misrata, was met with what it considered to be hostile behaviour by naval vessels of the Turkish navy which were escorting this ship. An inspection of its cargo was not carried out, following the refusal by Turkish authorities who claimed the cargo did not violate UN Security Council Resolution 2292. To note that the NATO operation had not been informed of an attempted inspection of the same ship by a Greek frigate, operating under the EU operation Irini, which also failed because of Turkish refusal to comply, because the post of EU liaison officer at MARCOM had been deleted at Turkey's request to prevent exchanges of information by NATO with operation EUNAVFORMED. A North Atlantic Council discussion on the incident, which France requested as a result of Turkish behaviour, was unsurprisingly inconclusive, showing once more that procedurally there is not much that can be done to address such behaviour by an Ally. Another incident occurred in late November 2020 between a Turkish merchant ship also headed for Libya and a German frigate operating under EU's Irini. The Germans initially boarded the ship but had to abandon their search for suspected contraband when Turkey refused to grant permission as the flag state.

Relations with NATO in general and the US in particular have taken a turn for the worse following the procurement of S-400 missile batteries from Russia. Turkey claims that it did so following refusal by Allies to provide it with equivalent Western systems. The Allies refute such claims, with the Americans arguing that discussions failed, not because they refused to sell Turkey Patriot missiles but because Ankara was insisting on a degree of technology transfer that was unprecedented and unacceptable. Be that as it may, the procurement of the Russian missiles poses a number of problems. From a military standpoint it is argued that S-400 radars are able to read the sophisticated electronics of the F-35 fighter aircraft and therefore not only compromise its capabilities but also reveal this technology to the Russians. In fact, some experts argue that in order to make the Russian batteries operational, their acquisition radars have already been calibrated with Turkish air force F-16 and F-4 aircraft, meaning that Russian specialists have gained access to the technical specifications of these NATO assets, as well as other Turkish aircraft such as B-737 AWACS, C-160 electronic warfare planes, K-135 refuellers etc. If this is born out, the strategic gain for the Russian Air Force is considerable. In any case, NATO military authorities have made clear that there is no way that the S-400s could be made part of NATO Integrated Air Defence. From the political point of view, this move by Turkey and

its vocal refusal to rescind it has taken Turkey's distancing from its Allies to a different level. The US is refusing to sell the F-35s that Turkey had ordered and has also excluded it from the production of the aircraft in which it was participating. Congress asked the President to impose sanctions on Turkey under the 'The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act' for engaging in a "significant transaction" with Russia and has forced his hand by including such a provision in the National Defence Authorization Act, which is the defence budget of the US, which passed Congress with overwhelming bi-partisan support. Senators Lindsey Graham and James Lankford, both Republican, have felt strongly enough about Ankara's stance to state, through an opinion piece published in the US press, that "...the President has given Turkey every opportunity to co-operate with NATO". Further telling of this gap between Allies was the unusually frank criticism levelled by some Foreign Ministers at the NATO Ministerial on December 1, 2020, including the outgoing Secretary of State who said that Turkey's purchase of a Russian weapons system was "a gift" to Moscow and that Turkey was undermining NATO's security and creating instability in the eastern Mediterranean in a dispute with Greece and non-NATO member Cyprus. Following the Ministerial, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg spoke by telephone with French President Emmanuel Macron, whose office said that the pair "had the opportunity to directly and in confidence address the concerns expressed by a growing number of allies in regard to Turkey's strategic choices". And Mr. Erdogan's response? To characterize any sanctions taken against Turkey as lack of respect toward a NATO member. Already in late October, regarding testing the S-400 batteries he had said that such tests "...have been and are being conducted. The US stance absolutely does not concern us".

Looking at the broader Eastern Mediterranean region, evolved Turkish foreign policy, ranging from more assertive to very aggressive, has gone from the declaratory position of "zero problems with neighbours" at the early stage of AKP governance, to quite the reverse. It is in fact almost impossible to find a neighbouring country which does not have problems with Turkey. Existing issues with Greece have expanded in scope, and increasingly aggressive Turkish behaviour has brought the two NATO members close to direct military confrontation. Further west, in exchange for military support through the provision of equipment and Syrian mercenaries, Ankara has prevailed on the Tripoli GNA government to sign a memorandum purporting to designate an exclusive economic zone between Turkey and a part of the Libyan coast which the GNA does not have authority over, while totally disregarding the existence of islands such as Rhodes and Crete and thus cutting across the exclusive economic zone that was delimited between Egypt and Greece. Turkey is violating the sovereign rights of Cyprus by drilling on its continental shelf, is blatantly disregarding UN resolutions by moving into Famagusta, and is now openly pushing for a two-state solution and opposing re-unification efforts of the island the UN Secretary General has been engaged in. Its relations with Egypt are at an all-time low as are those with Israel which is outraged by talk of "liberating Jerusalem", by open support to Hamas and by aggressive declarations, for instance by the Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet) vowing to mobilize the "Islamic Umma" against it. The same goes for the Gulf countries (with the exception of Muslim Brotherhood fellow traveller Qatar) which are now engaging more actively with the

countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and openly boycotting Turkish products. Turkey has unilaterally installed a military base inside Iraq with total disregard for protests from Baghdad. It has invaded Syria, in an increasing de-coupling of its policy from the US and the EU, with military operations using misnomers like Operation Peace Spring and Olive Branch, in an effort to cement its presence inside the country while presenting it as a defensive move. Relations with Iran are lukewarm with occasional minor flare ups. No need to talk of relations with Armenia, or Azerbaijan which seems to be one of the few exceptions.

While distancing itself from the US and the EU and embarking on a more confrontational course with its neighbours, Turkey has increased its contacts with Russia. Messrs Putin and Erdogan, both strong authoritarian figures, display an ability to embark in cooperative moves while understating their differences. But let us not forget why Mr. Erdogan went to Mr. Putin soon after the 2016 coup attempt. And although some try to portray the relationship as equitable - e.g. Dimitri Trenin arguing that Turkey is the only country that can control the presence of Russia in Syria - Russia is the senior partner in this relationship. The Akkuyu nuclear plant -which is being built and will be operated by Rosatom- and the TurkStream pipeline, will create a certain energy dependence on Russia. The S-400s will require Russian technical supervision, without mentioning what further dependence could exist through possible "back doors" in the system; and some experts are not ruling out further high-tech military procurement from Russia. Economic and trade cooperation are seen to be more in Russia's favour and were in fact used for political purpose by Russia after the downing of its aircraft by Turkey. Turkey's relationship with Russia does give Turkey some additional leverage in the region; but it is also one more factor its traditional partners in the West need to ponder upon.

Trying to look into the future is indeed a challenging but necessary exercise. Relations between Turkey and its traditional Western partners in Europe and the US are under pressure; many argue at a crossroads. The EU has had to discuss Turkish aggressive behaviour at the last European Councils and leaders have agreed to continue and to include examination of the relationship with Turkey (which they have not done yet partly due to the lack of a community of views) at the March European Council. Tony Blinken, Jake Sullivan and Michael Carpenter, who are expected to hold key positions in the Biden administration, have acknowledged Turkey's importance but have also expressed concern and scepticism about Mr. Erdogan's long term foreign policy direction and about tensions with Turkey which will require a lot of attention by the next Administration. It has been clearly stated on both sides of the Atlantic that this exercise will require close cooperation between the EU and the US.

The picture drawn above focuses on: the transformation of Turkish society, the political dynamic and the military; the turn that Turkish foreign policy has taken in terms of means employed and direction; and the impact these changes are having in the region and the relationship of Turkey with the West. What then will the discussants of the future direction of the EU and the US need to further look into?

Changes in Turkish society, its structure and its culture are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Nationalism will remain a determining force in foreign policy and a force to be reckoned with in domestic politics as well. Noting that both the AKP but also the leading opposition party CHP are in partnership with extreme nationalist parties and both compete in nationalist rhetoric, it should be expected that nationalism will play across the party divide, and will very much continue to do so in the military. Religion will be stronger in influencing the AKP but, given the expansion of its importance across larger segments of society and of public administration, including the military, a return to strong secularism as the philosophy of the state is highly unlikely. With regard to the continuing and possibly increasing role of religion it was very interesting to see a Turkish analyst advising that an eye should be kept on the entry requirements for Turkish military academies. Moreover, under AKP patronage over the past two decades, large segments of the economy have passed into the hands of a new business class which is not representative of previous secular entrepreneurs. These dynamics will continue to impose values, decision shaping and policy formulation on the political class, which may not be unreceptive to them in the first place. Perhaps further focus on what soft-power methods and information operations directed towards Europeans of Turkish origin are employed by the Diyanet and other state agencies, coupled with use of Muslim migrants as a means of increasing the Islamic presence in the EU and as a weaponized threat (which we witnessed in Spring of 2020) is also warranted.

We have looked at changes in the orientation and the composition of the military. Moreover, Turkey's military capabilities have grown and will continue to do so. Already the domestic arms industry covers 65% of requirements, which include high tech equipment such as drones and unmanned ships soon to be commissioned. Russia accounts for 13% of procurement. The remaining 22% (mostly high tech) is at this stage largely procured from Western sources as witnessed by considerable contracts with Germany, Spain and Italy. But those who will be looking to the future may also want to note that Turkey and Ukraine signed Military Cooperation Agreements in October 2020 and are already working on 50 joint projects, some since 2018. Ukraine, which still retains part of the armaments tradition from Soviet times, is expected to transfer know-how to Turkey's fledgling space agency and a satellite research and development laboratory at Roketsan, its leading manufacturer of rocket and missile engines and satellites. The two countries industries will also cooperate in R&D for engine technology, including development of a jet engine in Turkey's TFX fighter project and launching of a joint long-range drone programme. There is also discussion regarding development of a new transport plane based on Ukraine's AN-178. Other projects concern turboprop and diesel engines, radar and surveillance systems, active/passive robotic systems, as well as cruise missiles which Turkey plans to incorporate in the stealth submarines it is building with assistance from Germany.

The rather extensive enumeration of growing Turkish military capabilities goes to the question of how this will influence policy or, of course, if it is driven by it. When Mr. Akar, the Defence Minister, says that Turkey will continue pursuing its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and will



prevail because it is strong, one should factor this in the calculus of what is to come in terms of at least its regional foreign policy, and take such extensive procurement and development efforts into serious consideration. Perhaps this is what the Turkish political leadership has in mind when it urges its interlocutors to keep in mind the new realities. That said, the vulnerability of the Turkish economy is part of these realities; and as a Turkish analyst put it, there is an antithesis for the current leadership between political survival (by drumming up nationalism) and economic recovery.

Nonetheless, Mr. Erdogan plans to be with us for a while longer, his current political horizon being 2023 when he aims to win another term as President and launch the second centennial of the Republic of Turkey as the new Atatürk. He will continue to feel as an outsider, as he did growing up in a poor district of Istanbul with parents from the different Turkey of the eastern provinces, which will continue to influence his outlook, especially as it concerns the West. He has made his views about the West quite clear and quite publicly on numerous occasions over the years, and in a manner that goes beyond that of a politician just working the audience. Clarifying his views regarding Western involvement in hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean he said in September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020: "The era of those who for centuries have left no region unexploited..., no community unmassacred and no human being unoppressed, is coming to an end". In a speech on October 18, 2020, after accusing the US, France and Russia of supplying weapons to Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan, he questioned the reasons that brought the US to Syria to establish, as he said, 24 bases there. He continued accusing Western countries of manipulation and for "coming at us with scenarios and games on a global scale". In a more menacing and revealing tone, he added "...we frustrate each of these scenarios. We did it in Iraq, we did it in Syria, we did it in the Mediterranean, we did it in the Black Sea, and...on all international platforms we are involved in. Now...this country is advancing in pursuit of its own goals, not in the direction others push."

Those who will ponder on the steps ahead will do well to take into account a large degree of consistency in the construct laid out by those in positions of responsibility in Turkey, as well as the policies related to it. In his speech of April 2012 mentioned earlier, then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, was clear: "On the historic march of our holy nation, the AKP signals the birth of a global power and the mission for a new world order."

On December 9, 2020, Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman of and close advisor to President Erdogan, was asked what the strategic view of Turkey is. He responded by saying that there is an emerging multi-polar world and that the past two decades had seen a weakening of old alliances and a rise of new ones. While acknowledging that Turkey was part of NATO, he asked for flexibility from the Alliance which should take into account what "our own geography imposes on us". Turkey is with the Allies he said but also with its own interests and does not see it as a zero-sum game. In a more revealing manner, he went on to explain that Mr. Erdogan is critical of the international system and that in his view the United Nations Security Council should comprise more than the

current five permanent members, that international relations should be “based on equality” and that the “Eurocentric view of the world is over”, explaining that we “need a proper reading of new world dynamics”.

So, taking our cue from what these Turkish politicians have been saying, what needs to be comprehended is their understanding of this new world order, their new view of the world and of the emergence of new alliances following the weakening of the old (including NATO to which Turkey belongs but from which it requires flexibility and taking into account geographical realities and its national interest), as well as what a proper reading of new world dynamics means. For instance, does this include the eight military bases that Turkey has established in Albania, Azerbaijan, Libya, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, and Somalia? Will these views and parameters change after the departure of Mr. Erdogan and the AKP, or are they so deeply ingrained in the transformed Turkey to endure beyond this?

The real question is how to approach the issue of Turkey, its view of the US, Europe and the world. How does one deal with the new aggressive foreign policy and the many serious problems it creates to many of its neighbours and the broader region? Will a piecemeal, plugging-the-holes tactical approach suffice, with “not losing Turkey” being the primary or even the sole concern? A high-ranking US diplomat with recent experience in Ankara, speaking of what he called a structural systemic factor in relations with Turkey, said that it is no longer clear who the enemy is. A Turkish analyst pointed out that US and Turkish threat perceptions no longer converge. So is a strategic approach preferable through, according to Mr. Erdogan’s views, “a proper reading of new world dynamics”? And will the EU and the new US Administration resolve to step in, assume regional initiative and responsibility and fill the strategic void created in the last fifteen years which facilitates such rogue behaviour?

Such questions will require answers jointly by the US and the EU for the urgent development in the next few months of a common approach to this country which, as an analyst put it, may “remain an Ally but not a partner”.

Thrasylvoulos Terry Stamatopoulos

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador Thrasyvoulos Terry Stamatopoulos was NATO Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy from 2013 to 2016. He holds degrees from the London School of Economics, McGill University, and Georgia State University. He entered the Greek Foreign Service in 1979 and served in the United States, Egypt, Bulgaria and Belgium. As a national Diplomat he has held a number of important positions, including those of Director General for European Union Affairs and of Ambassador and Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council.







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